

Grow North October training notes

By now we have definitely moved into the Autumn with shorter, cooler days. There may even be frosts during this month, so it is time to enjoy your harvest and look ahead to the next season. A lot of work can be done at this time, as you empty your veggie beds working the soil ready for your next crops. Options to consider are green manures, seaweed, farmyard manure, and of course home made compost.

General Jobs for October

- Turn the compost heap to help speed rotting now that lower temperatures have slowed the process. If you intend to spread your compost in the garden, you may need to stop adding material, or at least separate the more recent additions that will not be sufficiently rotted down.
- Continue to pick apples and other fruit, such as pears that may be ripe, using any damaged fruit immediately to eat or to make pies, jams and preserves.
- Cover salad leaves with cloches or fleece to protect the foliage from the worst of the weather.
- In exposed areas consider moving wormeries into a sheltered spot where they will not become too cold. Draw off any liquid to prevent a build-up that may cause the material to become too wet to the detriment of the worms.
- Order your new fruit trees and bushes, as from now till the end of February next year is the ideal time to plant and you don't want to miss out on your favourite varieties. In the meantime, prepare the soil removing weeds and incorporating plenty of organic matter.
- Continue to weed winter crops such as brassicas and leeks to prevent competition for light and nutrients and to remove hiding places for pests and diseases.
- Place a cloche over parsley, to keep up supplies for the winter months. Tired plants may be woken up with a gentle application of nitrogenous plant feed.
- Keep the greenhouse / polytunnel well ventilated in the daytime and carry out any watering jobs early in the day so there is not too much dampness around on cold nights.
- Take every opportunity in dry and sunny weather to open greenhouse doors and ventilators to let the fresh air through. It is the best means of avoiding mould.

Harvesting and Planting jobs

This is also the time to plant out autumn onion sets and garlic, which may need to be ordered in, as not all garden centres stock these, or have them available early enough. You will certainly get a greater choice of variety from catalogue suppliers. The garlic needs the winter cold to perform well, so it is good to get these in now. They spend the winter establishing roots and get the longest possible growing season to help them produce those fat, juicy, pungent bulbs. The cold weather also encourages this hardy crop to produce bigger bulbs. It isn't really worth planting garlic here in the spring time. The cloves are usually planted direct into well-prepared soil which is weed-free, gets plenty of sunshine and has good drainage. On heavy soil, add plenty of grit and well-rotted compost to improve drainage and ensure that any hard layers of the soil (pans) are broken up by digging prior to planting.

The onions varieties for planting now are hardy and will overwinter producing a crop about a month earlier than the spring planted onions in theory. A cloche or fleece covering will get them off to a good start and stop the birds from pulling them out.

It may also be worth purchasing some small pre-grown plants, such as some over winter brassicas, such as kale, if you have not sown some earlier.

The late main-crop potatoes will be coming out of the ground now to store away. Lift any potatoes that may still be in the soil to prevent pests such as slugs and wireworms or diseases from taking their toll on the tubers.

It is a good time to harvest remaining leeks, carrots and beetroot. However, if you have well drained soil, you may consider leaving some root crops in longer and covering with straw to protect them and to prevent the ground from freezing. This may appeal if you don't have a suitable cool, frost free storage place for your vegetables. As you harvest and store or preserve your produce, remember to use up anything with a blemish or other damage first, and store or preserve only the best. Keep a regular check on any stored apples, pears, potatoes, or root vegetables, as if one becomes rotten, it may spread to the rest, and cause more wastage.

You may wish to cover raised beds with glass or plastic cloches to help extend the good growing conditions.

You can sow hardy broad beans and peas, either in a polytunnel or a coldframe, or under a cloche. This should give them a head start so you could be enjoying crops before spring planted peas and beans. There is more of a risk sowing at this time of year because in wet soil they may just rot rather than germinate. Always sow a few spares in pots to fill in gaps in the row. If you have a particularly wet and heavy soil it is probably not worth winter sowing, especially if you cannot provide cloches to cover them. Choose your variety of pea carefully – the smooth-seeded types such as the classics 'Feltham First', 'Kelvedon Wonder' and 'Meteor' are the best, although if you can find other smooth-seeded types, you may wish to try them out.

Many gardening books or magazines will suggest removing tomatoes even if they are still green in September. Living further north, it is good to give them longer than this, but towards the end of this month it is good to remove them, red or green. You will want to get these before any frosts come. Pick unripe tomatoes and place them in sealed brown paper bags either on their own (slow ripening) or with a ripe apple/banana (quick ripening). The reason for the apple/banana is due to ethylene gas production, which is a hormone that promotes ripening. You could also make some green tomato chutney, or try out green fried tomatoes (in a light batter).

The runner beans and French beans will come to an end when the frosts start. You may notice that your beans become more stringy at this stage of the season. Where you've allowed the bean to develop in the pod, these should be dried out. Spread the pods out somewhere dry – indoors, or a greenhouse to get them dried and then the shelled beans are dried further before being stored in air-tight jars for use in winter soups and stews.

When the beans come off, cut the foliage at the base for the compost heap and leave the roots with their nitrogen store in the ground to release in the next year.

Squashes and pumpkins are usually left on the plant for as long as possible. Once the parent plant does show definite signs of dying back, cut the fruit but leave it in place outside for the skins to ripen prior to storing, as this should give them a longer shelf life. Place the fruit on some bricks or a piece of slate or wood to lift it from the wet soil and to deter slugs.

Cut the last of the outdoor cucumbers and courgettes early in the month before the frosts arrive and pull up and compost the plants.

Brassicas are an autumn and winter mainstay. You may well have been harvesting calabrese and early purple sprouting broccoli for a month or so. Remove any yellowing

leaves from over-wintering brassicas, they are of no use to the plant and will encourage botrytis to develop and slugs. Apply lime where necessary. A low pH reduces the resistance in brassicas to club root. Crop rotation and increasing the level of pH to a more alkaline pH7.5 or pH8 will improve their chances. Add 1lb of lime to a square yard for average soil, less for sandy soil, more for clay.

Many gardeners prefer to leave Brussels sprouts until they have been frosted since they tend to have a sweeter flavour after a cold spell, but if there are some sprouts formed, you can start picking, starting at the bottom of the stem and working up. Cabbages can come up now too, they'll keep remarkably well in a shed or garage but beware a slug that may be lurking under the leaves. Check your cabbages thoroughly before storing, and as with all stored fruit and veg, keep a regular check, in case there have been some particularly well hidden slugs. One option is to sprinkle the outside with salt as this will deter them from eating away through the winter. Since the weather is likely to deteriorate now, it is a good idea to firm the roots and to provide tall plants such as sprouts and kale with a stake against the winter winds.

Cut down canes of Jerusalem artichokes to about 1ft. Dig out the tubers freshly as required over the coming months. Where eel worm is a problem, lift the tubers of Jerusalem artichokes and store them as you would potatoes.

Tend to fruit

Once the leaves have fallen from established trees, this season's growth can be pruned. Delay this work if the autumn leaf fall is late this year as you have until growth begins again in the spring to complete the work.

The autumn can bring strong winds so make sure that young trees are well supported and that any stakes and ties used when planting are still in good condition and doing their job, supporting stems and preventing wind rock. If ties have become too tight, ease them off to prevent 'strangling' the tree.

If growing your trees in a lawn, clear the soil around the trunk for a distance of about 90cm (3ft). This prevents competition from the grass and allows food and water to be applied and to get down to the roots more effectively.

Cut out fruited stems on cultivated blackberries and tie in the new ones. Sever any layered tips and replant elsewhere.

Take hardwood cuttings of blackcurrant bushes using vigorous shoots 12in long.

Plant new strawberries including the rooted runners into new rows. Prepare the ground using plenty of moisture-retentive compost or manure.

Improving your soil

Farmyard Manure

As ground becomes vacant you can dig it over and spread farmyard manure over the surface. Remember to enquire about your supply of manure, to avoid problems of manure contaminated with weed killer. For more details please see this link:

http://www.gardenorganic.org.uk/organicgardening/herbicide_damage.php?dm_i=4UO,6RPJ,JJZTV,GS0E,1

Leave the soil roughly dug in large clumps and the worms will break these up as they get the manure. The freezing and thawing of water in the soil will cause the soil to break up finely so becoming easier to handle in the spring.

Leafmould

If you don't have a cage for your leafmould and want to make it, get started at the beginning of the month to be ready when the leaves arrive. There are many reasons why leafmould is good for the vegetable garden including: improving soil structure, increasing soil water retention, and it also encourages earthworms. If you have 1 or 2-year old leafmould ready to use, apply as a mulch for winter coverage of bare soil. Garden Organic have a useful fact sheet:

http://www.gardenorganic.org.uk/factsheets/making_leafmould.php

Green Manures

There is still time to sow certain green manures for a winter cover crop, especially if the soil remains warm for a few weeks. A green manure will mop up any residual fertility from the soil, preventing loss of nutrients over winter from heavy rainfall. It will also protect the structure of the soil and add fertility in the case of leguminous types that have the ability to 'fix' nitrogen from the atmosphere.

Once an area has been cleared of crops, weed it and rake it level. You can start sowing green manures once rain has soaked the soil, or irrigate well if the weather is dry. Some will survive the winter while others may be killed by the frost - though the dead plants still provide some protection for the soil.

You should also consult your crop rotation plans before sowing a green manure. Several green manures are legumes, so should be kept in the pea and bean section of the rotation, and remember that also mustard is a green manure from the brassica family. This fact sheet may be a useful guide: <http://www.gardenorganic.org.uk/factsheets/g3.php>

Seaweed

Seaweed has been used as a soil improver for centuries, particularly in coastal areas. Seaweed contains several useful plant nutrients, including nitrogen, potassium, phosphate and magnesium. There are dried and liquidised forms available from garden centres and seaweed is a common additive to fertilisers, both organic and non-organic. You may wish to take advantage of our location and apply fresh seaweed, rather than opt for the processed seaweed products. Although seaweed is salty, the salt is not usually present in sufficient amounts to damage crops or soil, and the salt will in any case leach out readily with rainfall as it is highly soluble. You have different options available – digging in, using as a mulch or adding to your compost. If dug in fresh, then seaweed is used like any other soil conditioner, digging it in to one or two spades' depth below the surface and using up to a barrow load per square metre (if you have this much available). If placed on the compost heap, fresh seaweed should be mixed in with woody or fibrous material (prunings or paper for example). It can become rather slimy and gelatinous on its own or when mixed only with kitchen waste or lawn clippings. Fresh seaweed can be used as mulch, but it often becomes rather slimy and smelly as it decomposes on the soil surface, so is perhaps better dug in if this is likely to be a problem.

References

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